



Thursday, February 5, 2004

'I'm going to be in a better environment'

By Grace Rubenstein
Staff Writer

NORTH ANDOVER -- Fed up with an atmosphere that she calls harsh and disrespectful to students, School Committee member Darlene Rose Torosian is yanking her daughter from the public schools.

Torosian complains that some teachers and administrators at the high school identify certain students as troublemakers and treat them with suspicion. She said that creates a climate of rigid control in which their relationship with the students is defined by antagonism, not support. Teachers use a harsh tone when disciplining, leaving students feeling belittled and unhappy at school, she said.



KEN YUSZKUS/Staff photo Darlene Torosian with her daughter, Mandy Marquis, 16, outside of North Andover High School.

Similar problems probably appear in school districts everywhere, Torosian said, but her battleground is North Andover. She plans to start home-schooling her daughter, 16-year-old Mandy L. Marquis, as early as next week and use her position on the School Committee to promote reform.

"I am dedicated to help the schools," Torosian said. "My purpose when I got elected was to help the kids and help the families as much as I can, but that doesn't mean I don't go and help my daughter in a different way."

Superintendent Harry K. Harutunian said he has heard only a few people raise concerns over teachers' discipline styles, but he does hear "a lot of positive feedback" on the high school from parents. The district has "major, systemic issues" to address -- like budget cutbacks and the need to make the curriculum more cohesive from kindergarten through grade 12

-- but the problem raised by Torosian is not one of them, he said.

"I think the North Andover High School administration and staff does a very good job," he said. "I've spent 30 years doing this, most of it at high schools, and I think they work very hard as advocates for children up there."

However, he said he would look into the issue and did intervene in one instance that Torosian raised. He would not give details about that instance.

Torosian started a committee in 2002 to address the problem she describes at the high school. The group came up with a process for raising and addressing concerns about teachers -- but that didn't go far enough for her. Now, she said, the problems have hit too close to home for her, with her daughter's complaints.

Torosian said she wants to consider using bonus pay or some other method to reward teachers who make students feel good about themselves, enabling them to learn. She said she would tell parents to send their children to North Andover public schools only if they knew they would have a supportive teacher.

"Every day I go to school I end up getting in a fight with a teacher," said her daughter, a North Andover High junior who wants to be an actress and singer. "I feel run down, tired and sometimes sick to my stomach because of all the stress."

Specifically, Mandy said, some teachers and administrators made condescending comments when she wore revealing clothes, scolded her for being in the hallways even when she had a hall pass and refused to let her go to the bathroom when she needed to. They see her as a "back-talker," she said, and just two of her teachers listen to her and make class a place she likes to go.

When she starts home schooling, she predicted, "I'm going to want to learn. I'm going to be in a better environment."

The flaws in the disciplinary climate are nothing new, Torosian said, but she is fed up. Beyond the atmosphere, she said she wants her daughter to learn skills more pertinent to daily life and career success, like money management and public speaking.

"I'm not here to bad-mouth every teacher," said Torosian, who yesterday sent flowers to a Franklin School teacher who she

says has helped her son succeed. "There are good teachers."

Torosian said she plans to push for a system to hold teachers accountable for damaging behavior, such as instances she has heard of when teachers told students they were "stupid" or had "no brain cells."

She said she also wants to offer teacher workshops on communication, discipline methods and motivating students. Her School Committee term ends in 2005, and she said she has not decided whether to run again.

Torosian owns a beauty salon on Main Street, and plans to share the task of home schooling with her neighbor, she said.

School Committee Chairman Daniel J. Murphy said he does not believe there is a widespread problem with teachers acting harshly toward students, and the children he knows because he is a parent and youth sports coach are generally happy with how teachers treat them.

"I would encourage parents to send their kids to the North Andover schools, because I think the North Andover schools offer kids a healthy learning environment," he said. About Torosian's choice, he said, "That's between Darlene, her child and her own personal experience with that school. She has to do what's best for her child and for her family, and I completely respect that."

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